

# The Classroom Observer: Unwanted Interruption or Welcome Witness?

## Abstract

For many teachers, classroom observation can be a painful interruption/intrusion (Wragg, 1994:15) in the flow of a lesson's delivery in terms of facilitating a meaningful, creative and enjoyable learning environment that is supportive to both learner and teacher. Whilst I acknowledge that observation can be a daunting experience, eliciting fear and dread at having someone, an 'intruder' (Minton, 2005:18) who is not normally part of the audience, watch and scrutinise an individual's teaching style (O'Leary, 2014:62), I argue for the positive promotion of classroom observation (Double and Martin, 1998) and stress the benefits of 'develop[ing] personal skills of evaluation and self-appraisal' (1998:162). The discussion of an observed teaching session that I gave to a group of first year Fine Art undergraduates at Loughborough University in 2015 whose overall purpose/aim of the session was to familiarise students with core issues relating to the usage of sketchbooks as a common staple within contemporary art practice, helps to support my argument that the positive aspects of classroom peer observation (as a *live* process) outweigh the negatives and can in fact be supportive in providing an opportunity for teachers to realise or reinforce (O'Leary, 2014:62) the strengths in what they are doing. This is in addition to providing a window for the teacher to gain critical constructive feedback from often a more experienced colleague, who has probably at many points during their own teaching career, experienced similar moments of anxiety, positivity and reflection. The danger and the unanticipated events that 'liveness' can throw up is half the excitement of teaching. Indeed, 'coping with the unexpected is an important part of successful teaching' (Race, 2009:20).

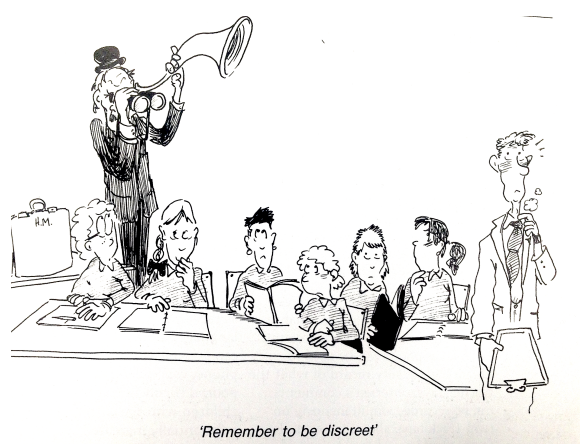
The write-up style that I adopt relates to a three-stage teaching process that I designed in my doctoral thesis (Campbell, 2016b) - *Anticipation, Action, and Analysis*. This extends to an existing model of reflective practice (Rolfe, 2001) and has been described as an 'original, practical and imaginative way of demonstrating reflective practice' (Newbold, pers. comm. 2015).

## Stage One: Anticipation

As part of Loughborough University's Associate Teaching Programme (ATP), I was required to take part in a series of teaching observations in order for me to reflect upon how my teaching practice could be developed once I had been observed by a colleague. I was required to observe two colleagues from both within and outside of my department and also undertake both a formative and summative observation of my practice.

Prior to the first observation of my teaching practice, the formative assessment, I felt anxiety and trepidation at being observed. This may have been due to my practice as a performer as I am aware of the issues involved related to processes, practices and concerns within Performance as it pertains to 'audience', 'liveness' and 'observation' (Alasuutari 1996; Freshwater 2009).<sup>1</sup> The term 'liveness' is often used within the context of Theatre and Performance to describe the relationship between experiencing

something live as opposed to a recording/mediatised version of a live moment. Peggy Phelan (1993) and Philip Auslander (1999) offer contrasting perspectives, which I have found useful in helping students understand the importance of liveness to Theatre and Performance. Phelan maintains 'Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented (1993:146), whilst Auslander argues that 'it is not realistic to propose that live performance can remain ontologically pristine or that it operates in a cultural economy separate from that of the mass media' (1999:40). 'Audience' is paramount to what I do as a performance artist and I am aware of some of the problems associated with the act of viewing, witnessing, and observing (Glenn 2003) (Figure 1).



**Fig. 1** Illustration taken from E.C Wragg's *An Introduction to Classroom Observation* (1994). p15.

Therefore, during the peer observation of my colleagues, I used recent knowledge that I had gained from Continuing Professional Development (CPD) to my advantage by allowing <sup>1</sup> these peer observations to provide me with useful opportunities to think about concepts relating to inclusion and issues involving teacher expectations of their students, especially in relation to classroom flipping <sup>2</sup>. Additionally, I learned how to incorporate, edit, modify and revise what I had seen for the benefit of my own teaching. For example, when I conducted a peer observation of one of my colleagues giving a seminar on Theatre and Performance, I wanted to see how the lecturer was able to get a group of first year undergraduate students to grips with the (rather tricky) concept of 'liveness',<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is 'the term used to describe the learning activities professionals engage in to develop and enhance their abilities' (CPD, 2016).

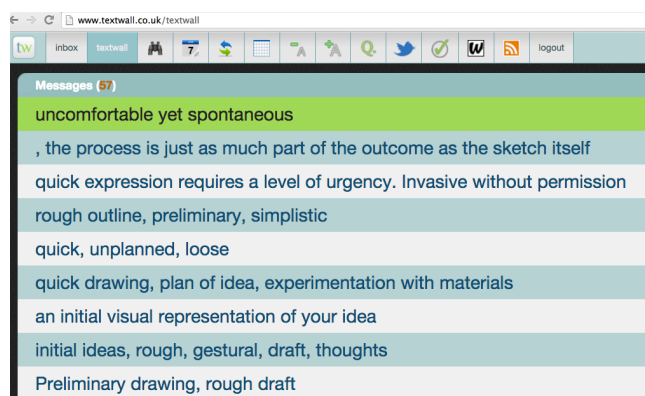
<sup>2</sup> Classroom flipping or 'flipped learning' is the term used to describe activities that students undertake prior to commencement of a particular teaching session in order for the teacher to fully maximise teaching session time, building upon the work that students have done before the session. As Damien Marshall (2016) suggests, 'Flipped learning (or flipped classroom teaching) involves swapping the contact time from the traditional lecture followed by reading or group work to using the contact time for discussion and feedback. The contact time is an interactive, engaging and two-way learning experience, rather than passive learning in the traditional model.' (2016:8).

(especially given the students' limited knowledge of the philosophical foundations of Performance at that stage in their studies).

It was not surprising that none of the students had pre-read the large amount of text that they had been instructed to consult before the seminar (a lesson learned in terms of the flipped classroom approach – students may not have time /not want to complete large amounts of work prior to a teaching session). In addition, I also reflected on concerns that I had when I observed another lecturer handing out 'self-analysis' charts printed onto paper for students to grade their progress by ticking one of five choices: 'Struggling', 'Minimal Work', 'Average/More Work Needed', 'On track', and 'Done' and then sharing their responses with the lecturer and their peers.<sup>4</sup>

## Stage Two: Action

A week prior to my observation by one of my colleagues, I invited students who were due to attend my session to comment upon what they understood to be some of the ways to use an artist sketchbook by referring to the free and anonymous messaging application, Textwall, to post their responses and ideas (Figure 2).



**Fig.2** Textwall comments made by students

Rather than being asked to read huge amounts of text (as was the case with the Theatre and Performance seminar as previously mentioned), I encouraged students to engage with a short but provocative online article.<sup>5</sup> Students already had some experience of working with sketchbooks in their studio practice and drew upon these experiences in addition to the article. In the physical classroom, students explored what constitutes

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<sup>4</sup> I do not think the teacher necessarily wanted to 'name and shame' individual student(s) for having difficulties (and for some bravely admitting so), but wanted to deploy the group dynamic of the situation to help foster and nurture peer support. As a result, the process could be seen as compromising the safe space intended for a learning environment.

<sup>5</sup> Students were invited to read the following: <http://www.theonion.com/article/artist-always-carries-around-sketchbook-in-case-he-37804>

effective sketchbook practice. This was achieved through a collaborative intervention taking place between them and a (physically present) guest speaker (Fine Art student, Rory Flynn) and a Skype call to a (physically distant) guest speaker (professional artist, Helen Cann). Fostering collegiality between myself, the students, one of their peers (Rory) and a professional (Helen), we all shared examples of our effective sketchbook practice. When Helen attempted to engage the students in a live drawing activity via Skype, the lack of a sound system impacted upon the activity. There was no built in computer or data projector and no obvious sound system. This meant that some students found it difficult (and sometimes impossible) to hear Helen calling via Skype.

### **Stage Three: Analysis**

A key critical incident, which took place during the session, related to how I best proceed in future if the technology that I plan to deploy (in this instance Skype and the sound equipment) malfunctions. To avoid any further awkwardness and embarrassment in front of my students, I now make sure to equip myself with not just having a plan B but a plan C, D, E and so on. And to that effect, I also verify that the materials presented to students via virtual means are available in physical forms too. Since the technology (AV equipment) completely malfunctioned during my observed teaching session, I have made it a point to ensure that technicians visit the classrooms where I am teaching before I conduct lessons that are heavily reliant on technology.

In his analysis of my teaching session, the observer commented that this was a well thought out and well-structured session with good opportunities for student input and involvement. The session had technologically-enhanced learning at its core and demonstrated my experience of being able to teach and support student learning effectively in my subject area by incorporating analogue and digital learning processes as pedagogic strategy.<sup>6</sup> I was also commended for my planned use of technology (though hindered by the total lack of facilities in the room, which was not counted against me). The observer had not seen Textwall used before and this seemed to be an interesting way of getting student input. The observer suggested that overall there was a rich diversity of content through my contributions, student discussions, guest speakers and students discussing their own sketchbooks. As a result, the students ended with a rich vocabulary of words for describing sketchbook practice (the primary learning objective).

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<sup>6</sup> Being a recipient of a Loughborough University Teaching Innovation Award in order to emphasise the discussion of the inclusion of digital learning technologies within my teaching practice in 2015 was a really huge development in terms of me generating a learning environment that operated on both physical and virtual platforms (Campbell, 2016a).

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